News



by Christopher White

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A Wyoming prosecutor has agreed to another review of the recommended charges against retired Cheyenne Bishop Joseph Hart, less than two weeks after informing the alleged victim at the center of the case that he would not pursue the matter.

The reversal came June 19 following a conference call between Natrona County District Attorney Dan Itzen and Cheyenne Police Department officials who said they felt "very strongly" about their recommendations that charges be brought against Hart following a two-year review of the case.

Police officials told the Casper Star-Tribune that the prosecutor misunderstood the police files and will meet again to discuss the case this week.

The victim at the center of the case told NCR June 22 that he is scheduled to meet this week via conference call with representatives from the prosecutor's office, and he expects a statement to be issued later this week from both the prosecutor and the Cheyenne Police Department with an official update on the case.

Hart, now 88, was bishop of Cheyenne from 1978 until his retirement in 2001. If charges are filed against him, he will become the first bishop in the United States to face criminal prosecution for the sexual abuse of minors. Unlike most states,

Wyoming has no statute of limitations for criminal prosecution.

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Prior to being made a bishop, Hart was a priest in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, for two decades following ordination in 1956. During his more than 50 years of active ministry in two states, he has continuously dodged allegations of serial abuse, which he has consistently denied. As of 2019, the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph had settled 10 cases of abuse against Hart.

In addition to criminal charges against Hart, his case has been under review by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith since 2010. When Bishop Steven Biegler was appointed to lead the diocese in 2017, he reopened the investigation into Hart and concluded that the allegations against Hart were credible. In 2019, the diocese announced that Pope Francis had green lighted a penal process against Hart , which is still ongoing.

Following the initial decision not to prosecute, Biegler issued a statement saying he stands by the diocese's determination and noted that Hart's case is still under review in Rome. He also called on prosecutors to offer an "adequate account of the reasons for its decision not to pursue criminal charges."

"This would assist the public in understanding why such a decision was reached," he said at the time.

Following the initial news of Itzen's decision not to prosecute, Hart's alleged victims told NCR they were stunned by the decision not to bring charges against the retired bishop, but they described a sense of cautious optimism at the latest developments.

"I'm encouraged by the fact that part of the system there had a willingness to open their mind and realize maybe they had possibly missed something," said Darrel Hunter of Kansas City, Missouri. Hunter is the son of Hart's long-time secretary, Stella Hunter, who says he was the victim of misconduct by Hart at age 12, along with his two brothers, Kevin and Mike.

"Human nature is such that most people don't want to change their mind," he told NCR.

David Clohessy, former director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said in a statement that he was "puzzled but encouraged" by the prosecutor's reversal.

In a later interview, Clohessy said he hopes this marks a turning point in a case that law enforcement officials have been investigating for two years, adding to the uncertainty and the pain of the victims at the center of it.

"As many people as Hart has hurt," he told NCR, "it should not fall on one or two victims to carry the load."

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